

# Confusing Animal Words



By Greg Mertz, DVM

**A**t the New England Wildlife Center we care for approximately 350 different species of animals. No dogs, no cats; no horses, no cows. Beyond that there are a lot of different kinds of animals. Some are wildlife. Some are domestic. Some are exotic. Some are native. Some are naturalized. Some are invasive. Some are tame. Some are feral. All are animals.

What do all these adjectives mean? What is an exotic animal? How does a wild animal differ from a domestic? It is a bit of a maze, if you aren't working with these words and these categories of animals every day. There are a lot of overlaps and shades of gray between definitions and some of these are my own because I could not find simple, clear explanations. And you and God know, I am no etymologist.

Domestic Animal-Merriam-Webster comes to our aid with this one: "any of various animals (as horse and sheep) domesticated so as to live and breed in a tame condition." Domestic animals need food, shelter and care from people to thrive. In other words, domes-

tic animals are needy. Think about your dog. Needy, right?

Wild Animal-Again Merriam-Webster comes to our aid again: "living things and esp. mammals, birds and fishes that are neither human nor domesticated." Wild animals need nothing from us to thrive. Wild animals are raccoons, deer, bear, bluegills and in my estimation butterflies and beetles.

Native Animal-And again Merriam Webster: "living or growing naturally in a particular region; an original or indigenous inhabitant. The State of MA takes a stricter view of this definition. They say, "native...means a species which either occurs, or has occurred, within MA, provided that the original occurrence of such species is not the result of a deliberate or accidental introduction by humans into MA nor an introduction elsewhere which spread into MA." 321CMR10.02 So, bear, white-tailed deer, raccoons, grey squirrels, and many other species are native wild animals. What about red fox? Maybe. Maybe not. Most of the red fox strains were imported to this region by foxhunters in the 18th and 19th Centuries. Some strains may have done a circum-Artic migration. In another place the State of MA puts the time limit on native species as those that were here before Europeans came to MA. This raises an interesting

question: what are coyotes? Are they native or naturalized? They migrated here from the Western U.S. on their own without the aid and assistance of people. They were not here before Europeans, so, I guess, they are naturalized wild animals.

Naturalized Animal-Webster again: "to bring into conformity with nature," and "to cause (as a plant) to become established as if native." Like who? Well, those red foxes, and starlings, pheasants, and house sparrows are examples.

Invasive Animal-This is a relatively new usage. An invasive animal is a non-native species that is thriving so well that it is out-competing and damaging the health of the local native species. For instance, mute swans are taking and damaging the food supply of other native waterfowl like black duck, mallards, Canada geese, and more. To rise to the level of invasive, an animal species has to do significant damage. There is a new brand of American patriot that feels all invasive, feral, and naturalized species should be executed.

Exotic Animal-to paraphrase Merriam it is an animal that is from a different country. Implied in this definition is that it does not already occur in the new country. The better definition embraces regions or contiguous habitats instead of geopolitical boundaries.

For instance a red-eared slider (a turtle) is exotic here in MA but not in Louisiana. An umbrella cockatoo is exotic here. Exotic is most often used to describe pet animals, because if they were in the wild they would be considered a naturalized, invasive, or feral animal. What this points out is that the word domestic, wild and exotic are difficult words to work with. Pet exotic animals can be wild ones that have been taken out of the wild. There are lots of laws that are working to stop that practice.

Feral Animal-This is a domestic animal that is now surviving if not thriving in the wild. For instance the most common example is a feral cat, but becoming almost as common is the mute swan.

Tame Animal-Implied is the wildness of the animal to begin with. Merriam says that wildness has been subdued. We have a wild red-tailed hawk at the Center that is now tame. He will sit on a glove and eat from our hand. Some species are more compliant than others. Many of the exotic pets I see in veterinary appointments are in my estimation wild, but tamed, animals.

The overlaps between these words are confusing but like most words the intent is carried. Nevertheless, it is the holes in the definitions that make for lively discussion.

